

Let My People Go: Cairo, Illinois, 1967-1973

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Cleary produced such an astounding literary output despite her burdens of family life, poverty, social restrictions, and ill health that included both morphine and alcohol addiction.

Author Susanne K. George argues successfully that Cleary's life and work are inextricably connected. The diligently researched biography tells a compelling story of the struggles of a remarkable writer and reveals much about nineteenth-century midwestern life. The extensive bibliography of Cleary's work makes this author accessible to scholars and the public for the first time. The selected works of Kate Cleary include some of the best examples of her writing and present a valuable addition to the American literary canon.

Let My People Go: Cairo, Illinois, 1967-1973, edited by Jan Peterson Roddy, photographs by Preston Ewing Jr. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996. xxvi, 98 pp. Illustrations, notes, chronology. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY DARREL E. BIGHAM, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA

This book evolved from a photographic exhibit by Preston Ewing Jr. depicting seven years of racial strife in Cairo following the suspicious death of a young black man in July 1967. A strong grass-roots movement emerged during those tumultuous years. In 1973 the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights issued two reports on race relations in the city, and federal courts upheld the right of local African Americans to engage in protest activities.

Ewing took thousands of photographs while president of the local NAACP. Jan Peterson Roddy, professor of cinema and photography at Southern Illinois University, selected the approximately one hundred photographs that form the core of this "photonarrative" and wrote the preface. Two others comment briefly on growing up in Cairo and on photography in civil rights history. This material is supplemented by quotations gathered by graduate students in sociology from six persons active in the protest movement.

If seen as an impressionistic visual reminder of a phase of the civil rights movement, *Let My People Go* achieves its purpose. Despite its advertisement, though, this is not history. The introductory essay is unreliable and superficial. Nowhere will the reader learn much about Cairo's unusual history—as the "city of America" with a highly checkered history. (Why, for instance, did the city's population—15,000 at its peak in 1920—drop from 9,400 to 4,700 between 1960 and 1990, when 55 percent of the people were African Ameri-

cans?) Race relations and black community life prior to 1967 are only hinted at. The editor's ahistorical tendencies are amply evident: for instance, the photographs represent the eye of a not disinterested observer; none of the interviewees is a teacher or minister; and there is no bibliography.

For those interested in the history of Iowa and the Midwest, this impressionistic coffee-table book underscores the paucity of serious studies in midwestern African-American and urban history.

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